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SUBJECT: GOB Mocks U.S. Financial Sanctions But Responds In Kind

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) Summary: The GOB has threatened to freeze the assets of President George Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in response to the financial sanctions imposed by the U.S. on President Lukashenko and nine other members of his regime. Affected Belarusian officials have denied the existence of assets in the U.S. and Lukashenko suggested that any assets found in the U.S. be donated to the USG to help care for needy Americans. Responses from state media representatives and affected GOB officials have ranged from laughter to outrage. One member of Parliament called on the international and American communities to "curb Bush" and demanded that President Bush be tried before an international tribunal. End Summary.

Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better: GOB To Freeze U.S. Assets

12. (U) During an interview with Belarusian Television (BT) on June 25, State Secretary of the Belarusian Security Council Viktor Sheiman stated that in response to U.S. asset freezes, Belarus will "freeze the accounts of George Bush and Condoleezza Rice in Belarusian banks" in addition to introducing "additional adequate measures against other officials in the Bush Administration." Sheiman denied the existence of Belarusian accounts in the U.S. and ridiculed the U.S. action, saying "Washington has been looking for these accounts for ten years" but has not found anything. Sheiman recalled President Lukashenko's earlier statement that any funds found abroad should be donated to needy Americans. He dismissed U.S. financial sanctions as an "irritated reaction to Belarus' independent and sovereign policies," including the construction of a Belarusian-Russian Union State and the political-military activities of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Response from GOB Officials Ranges from Laughter to Outrage

13. (U) On June 20, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Andrei Popov ridiculed the executive order, saying it "makes a judicious person not just smile but laugh." He stated that the executive order pursues the "old objectives" of misinforming the international community about Belarus and discrediting its leaders. Popov denied that Belarusian officials have U.S. accounts but suggested that any "mythical funds" that the U.S. administration

finds should be used to support poor Americans.

¶4. (U) On June 20, Chairwoman of the Central Election Commission Lidiya Yermoshina called the U.S. financial sanctions a violation of her civil rights. Denying that she has any assets in the U.S., she stated that such infringements on private property should only be possible if "George Bush brought a lawsuit against me." Yermoshina added that she would not appeal her case to the U.S. Supreme Court due to lack of money to cover the legal fees.

¶5. (SBU) On June 27, the chairman of the Committee on International Affairs and National Security of Belarus' Upper Chamber of Parliament, Nikolai Cherginets (who is on both the travel restriction and asset freeze lists), suggested convening an international tribunal to try President Bush. According to Cherginets, the objective of the forum would be to call on the world and American public to "curb Bush." Cherginets claimed that certain lawmakers in Belgium, the Netherlands, Russia, several countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and the United States have welcomed such a tribunal. Cherginets noted that Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a vice speaker of Russia's State Duma, wants to serve as the main rapporteur. He said that the conference could take place in Belarus and Venezuela because of the countries' similar views about U.S. foreign policy. Earlier, Cherginets commented that "it should be noted the 'black list' is drawn up by a 'black woman'."

State Media Blasts U.S. Decision to Impose Financial Sanctions

¶6. (U) BT commentator Yuriy Prokopov derided the U.S. decision to implement sanctions, stating that U.S. Congress was too tempted by the tales from Belarusian opposition leaders about "multibillion dollar treasures" of Belarusian political leaders to resist trying to seize the fictitious assets. Prokopov also intimated that the U.S. was searching for these fabricated funds because the "impoverished" U.S. Congress needs money to fund the War in Iraq and the Belarusian opposition.

¶7. (U) State weekly "Seven Days" proposed outlandish responses to U.S. implementation of financial sanctions on members of the Lukashenko administration. One article suggested that the Belarusian authorities freeze the U.S. accounts of Belarusian opposition leaders who "regularly go to Washington to report [on their activities]." In a separate article, Seven Days asserted that leaders of other corrupt regimes were able to keep their money so long as they maintained their friendship with the U.S. The article cited former Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, who according to the author is currently residing in the U.S. and has USD 10 billion in his bank accounts. [Note: Marcos died in 1989.]

"Union State" Expresses Concern Over Anti-Belarus Statements

¶8. (U) On June 22, the Belarusian-Russian Union State Parliamentary Assembly issued a statement expressing "serious concern" about the frequent strongly worded statements from western countries about the Lukashenko regime. According to the proclamation, such statements question the legitimacy of a democratically and popularly elected president of a sovereign nation. The Parliamentary Assembly noted that since all parliamentary observers from CIS countries positively assessed the conduction of the presidential elections and referendum in Belarus, it is "obvious to unbiased observers that the legally elected president enjoys the support of Belarus voters."

Comment

¶9. (SBU) Despite public dismissals of the sanctions by prominent officials, the GOB reaction shows that the officials are incensed by U.S. financial sanctions. We do not know if Sheiman's comments about freezing U.S. assets in Belarus are more than hortatory.

